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ABSTRACT

Children can create pantomimes that will motivate and enhance their story writing. The "Writing through Mime" program has been introduced to some 4500 children, grades kindergarten through 5, in 29 New York City elementary schools, under the auspices of the Learning through an Expanded Arts Program. A step-by-step blueprint was developed for teachers to implement a mime and writing program in their classrooms. Step 1 of the program, the introduction, defines mime for the students. In step 2, pantomiming the stories, the teacher offers a story topic and the students perform their pantomime; in steps 3 and 4, the students write, then share, their stories. Some of their writing samples generated from mime sessions illustrate specifically how mime benefits writing. The first of two supplemental activities suggested is an exercise to heighten emotional expression in which the teacher assigns single emotive words for the students to act out. The second activity, to be undertaken after the students have mastered solo acting, is to do scenes in pairs or small groups. (Contains 10 references.) (CR)

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Writing through Mime: Using Silent Drama to Enhance Story Writing

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Abstract

Children can create pantomimes that will motivate and enhance their story writing. This article presents a step-by-step blueprint for teachers to implement a mime and writing program in their classrooms. Children's writing samples generated from mime sessions are included to illustrate specifically how mime benefits writing.

Writing through Mime: Using Silent Drama to Enhance Story Writing

Picture yourself walking into a second grade classroom and witnessing this spectacle. The desks and chairs have been pushed to the back of the room, creating a "stage" area in the front. Half the students occupy the stage, enthusiastically performing improvised pantomimes, while the other half watch from their seats, transfixed. As the mime scenes unfold, you discern a common theme in the myriad bodily movements and facial expressions: the actors are pretending to be fishing. One boy's finger gets stuck in an imaginary hook, and his face is contorted with pain; near him, a girl flails her arms desperately before she falls into her illusory lake; another child triumphantly holds up his imaginary catch, which he promptly proceeds to clean and cook. After a few minutes these children end their performances, and the rest of the class applauds. The actors return to their seats, whereupon they write down the stories they have just constructed. Towards the end of the period, an Asian-American girl shares with the class what she has written. She reads, as the class listens attentively:

> I was going fishing one day I put on my clothes. I got something that fishes like. I took my fishing hook. I went fishing and I caught ten little fish. I wanted a big fish. The something happned I caught a big fat shark. He push me in to the deep, deep water I all most dron. then a big whale bigger then the shark He push me back to the boat and He killed the shark. I gave him all the fish to thank him for saving me. and He gave me the shark for me I ate the shark at lunch I felt happy. and the shark was good. (Rubing, age 8, P.S. 20, New York, N.Y.)

Class activities such as this have become a reality for some 4500 children in the twenty-nine New York City elementary schools where I have introduced my program, known as Writing through Mime. Under the auspices of Learning through an Expanded Arts Program, this teaching method has

served to motivate and improve the writing of children from widely differing backgrounds and abilities in grades K through 5. Teachers with no drama training have found it easy to implement, as children already use mime in their natural play. And, because mime requires no materials or special equipment, it has been of particular value in fund-strapped schools.

That mime can successfully stimulate writing activity should come as no surprise, given the beneficial effects of dramatic play on literacy skills. Theorists have long recognized the relation between the two activities. Vygotsky (1978), for example, viewed written language as a complex symbolic system that is in part mastered through the development of symbolic play. Pellegrini (1985) noted that symbolic play and literate behavior are similar: both consist of narratives, whereby characters solve problems in fictionalized events that unfold temporally and causally. Along the same lines, Bruner (1984) posited that social dramatic play facilitates story schema development, which leads to better writing.

The research literature confirms this link between dramatic play and literacy abilities. A number of researchers who taught children dramatic play skills found that these children soon outperformed untrained children in such areas as story comprehension, sequential memory for stories, story telling, and vocabulary (Saltz and Johnson, 1974; Dansky, 1980; Pellegrini and Galda, 1982; Gourgey, Bosseau, and Delgado, 1985). Pellegrini (1980) further determined that frequency of spontaneous dramatic play in kindergarden children was highly correlated with writing fluency. In addition, McNamee, McLane, Cooper, and Kerwin (1985) demonstrated that children who

dramatized their own stories, as compared with children who merely dictated stories, made significantly more comments about the writing process, initiated more dialogue concerning writing logistics, and produced stories of greater complexity.

Mime, though it is not verbally mediated as is conventional drama, does share many central features with spoken drama, among them role playing, dramatic conflict, and story structure. However, mime has special features of its own that make it a powerful motivational tool. Prominent among mime's advantages is its reliance on physical activity and emotional expression. Children enjoy making big, bold facial expressions and bodily movements, especially after having to sit still in a clasroom for hours. Moreover, since many children feel more confident in their physical talents than in their academic skills, doing mime often enhances their self-concept. Besides, children frequently write about the action-oriented themes that are inherent in mime.

But mime does more than just motivate children to write - it can actually help improve their writing. Risemberg and Zimmerman (1992) investigated the effects of two components in mime enactment -- motoric and emotional enactment -- on children's autobiographical writing. Seventy-one 3rd grade inner city students in three classrooms, equivalent in pretest writing performance, were assigned to three conditions: full mime enactment, motoric mime enactment only (no facial expressions), and control (verbal story-telling). After brief mime exposure, experimental subjects enacted and then wrote two emotionally-laden autobiographical stories, while the control subjects verbalized

and then wrote these stories. Analysis of their writing revealed that the full mime group outscored the control group on four out of five writing measures, including story length, word diversity, and level of complexity.

What follows is a procedural blueprint to enable a teacher to introduce Writing through Mime into the classroom. Step One of the process, the introduction, does not involve writing and occurs during the first session only. Steps Two through Four - pantomiming, writing, and sharing - form the core of the program and are carried out during each session thereafter. Following this, I present and discuss three samples of children's writing that were generated from mime sessions, in order to demonstrate specifically how mime benefits writing. Last, I include supplemental mime activities designed to round out the program.

Step One: Introducing Mime

During the first class, the teacher should elicit discussion about the term "mime". It can be defined as a form of acting with two unique features: (1) no words or sounds are used, and (2) only imaginary objects are handled.

Next, the teacher demonstrates handling a simple imaginary object: a baby. She rocks this baby in her arms, looks at it with a loving expression, puts it back into its crib, and finally asks her students to guess what she was holding. After this demonstration, the teacher need never again perform for the class, unless she so chooses; hereafter she simply comments on her students' actions.

Following this exercise, the teacher creates a stage area in the front of the classroom by having the children move their desks and chairs towards the back of the room, but not so far back that they are unable to get in and out of their seats.

For the first exercise the teacher asks vounteers, one at a time, to come on stage and pantomime playing a game or sport. Each student chooses the game he will pantomime, but no two children may choose the same one. As each child pantomimes, the teacher directs him to face the audience at all times and to make movements that are large and slow. Whenever the child handles an imaginary object, such as a ball or a racquet, the teacher should instruct him to cup his hands to take on the size and shape of the object. As each child finishes, the teacher asks other students to guess what game the child played and what objects, if any, he used. If the children run out of ideas to act out, the teacher or other classmates may privately make suggestions (some less common ones include ping pong, surfing, billiards, and gymnastics).

When each student who wishes to pantomime has had at least one turn, the teacher informs the class that in future sessions they will pantomime longer, more involved stories and then write these stories down.

Step Two: Pantomiming the Stories

The teacher should prepare in advance two story topics for students to act out each session. Topics should consist of a simple, action-oriented imperative sentence. For at least the first few classes, it is advisable to use

topics that are a part of daily life for children, e.g., "Make a sandwich" or "Play baseball". Other good beginner topics include "Paint a picture", "Fly a kite", "Dig with a shovel", "Iron your clothes", "Play with snow", "Blow balloons", and "Climb a ladder". Note that, in being concise, these statements give students wide latitude for possibile story developments. Once students become adept at mime, the teacher need not restrict them to topics from everyday life and may tap into the realm of fantasy, such as "Walk on the Moon." She may even assign topics from units in their courses, including social studies and science. Alternatively, children can devise their own topics; indeed, they will soon be asking to do so.

For the sake of time efficiency, students in this and in subsequent sesions will perform alongside several other students. This arrangement, besides allowing more time for writing, will make any shy children feel more comfortable about performing. So, the teacher now divides the class into two equal-sized groups: the actors, who go on stage, and the audience, which remains seated. Later in the session, the two groups will switch roles.

The teacher, out of earshot of the audience, conducts a brief conference with the actors. First, she presents them with the story topic. For the purposes of illustration, let us say the topic is "Brush your teeth." Then, without suggesting any specifics herself, the teacher tries to elicit from the actors two categories of story elements: (1) the steps that are universal to this story (opening the medicine cabinet, taking out the toothpaste, unscrewing its cap, putting toothpaste on the toothbrush, turning on the faucet, etc.) and (2) developments that will be unique for each story (squirting toothpaste all over the

mirror, grimacing at the unpleasant tasting toothpaste, or maybe constantly dropping the tube). From the ideas the children generate during this conference, each child decides what direction his story will take.

When this brief conference is over, the teacher issues two commands: (1) "Spread out", whereupon the children spread out evenly throughout the stage area, and (2) "Action", at which time each child begins to act out his version of the story. Until children have had practice in mime, there should be no interaction among the children; each performs solo alongside the others.

The teacher, coaching from the sidelines, makes sure that students remain within the limitations of mime (no words and no props), and she comments on four areas: hand gestures, body gestures, facial expression, and story development. With respect to hand gestures, the teacher sees to it that students move their hands accurately when holding or touching imaginary objects, so it is clear to the audience what the objects are. Body gestures pertain to larger movements, arising from the torso, arms, and legs, that express various physical activities; these movements, to be effective, should be bigger-than-life. Facial expression is the delivery of emotion, somewhat exaggerated, so that the audience knows what the actor is feeling at all times. Finally, story development refers to having a plot with several different and, hopefully, interesting cause-and-effect activities.

After about three minutes, or whenever the students have finished, the teacher sends the group of actors back to their seats. Then the audience makes guesses about both the general topic of the pantomimed stories and their various

developments; corroborations of the guesses, however, should not occur just yet.

Next, before any writing occurs, the two groups switch roles, so that the audience becomes the actors and vice versa. The new acting group receives a different story topic; otherwise, everything proceeds as it did with the first group.

Steps Three and Four: Writing and Sharing the Stories

When both groups have finished pantomiming, the teacher tells her students to write their stories down - not the stories they observed, but the stories they enacted themselves. In addition, she can select two students, one from each group, to write their stories on the blackboard.

While students write, it is a good idea for the teacher to circulate among them, praising the good aspects of their writing and assisting those who need help. During this first draft, it is more important to focus on content than on mechanics. The time allocated for writing should be in the range of 20-30 minutes, depending on the children's ages and their writing proficiencies.

After writing the story, equally as important is sharing it, for, just as mime is intended for an audience, so, too, must writing have readers if it is to be meaningful.

A good way to begin sharing is to have the blackboard writers read their stories aloud, thereby revealing the hitherto secret topics. The teacher can ask the authors' classmates to comment on these compositions before she herself

adds comments, positive ones before negative ones, concerning both form and content.

When this discussion is over, the teacher can choose two or three of the remaining students with interesting compositions to read theirs aloud. Though the teacher cannot analyze these stories in as great detail, she can still point out, say, the many interesting variations that are possible within the same theme.

Next comes the culminating event for this part of the session, the time when all students share their stories. The teacher calls all students, each with his composition in hand, onto the stage area, whereupon pairs or clusters of students read one another's stories, give each other feedback, and then re-circulate, so that each student reads several other students' compositions. Having witnessed their classmates' pantomimes earlier in the session, the children are now eager to read each others' narratives in order to corroborate their guesses. As for the writers, when children know that their stories will be read by their peers, their writing becomes increasingly purposeful and vivid.

The children can rewrite and expand upon these stories at a later time. In order to vitalize a session such as this, the teacher may direct students to re-enact their scenes, having them embellish their original pantomimes and thus their written work. During revision sessions, the teacher can place more emphasis on their following formal writing conventions. Indeed, she may choose to give a brief writing lesson during revision time, and students can apply the principles of this lesson to their writing. Again, the teacher is encouraged to circulate among her students as they re-write; alternatively, she may conduct individual conferences. When students finish their written stories,

they can illustrate them and put them into book form, post them onto a bulletin board, or add them to the classroom library collection.

Writing Samples

Earlier I listed what I believe to be mime's beneficial effects on children's writing, among them improved expression of detail, greater awareness of audience, and the incorporation of emotion. To illustrate, we now examine three of my students' narratives, each reflecting one of these outcomes. All three are first drafts of narratives that children wrote immediately after pantomiming their respective stories.

Here, first, is a story written by a fourth-grader, whose assigned topic was "Open a window":

> I woke up in the morning, bright and early. The birds were singing, and the sun shining right into my bedroom. I opened up the window and felt such a strong breeze that it blew me almost on to the floor. The wind stopped after awhile. I opened the window again and it closed right on my fingers. I managed to get out of the window. It was a strange window, white and chipped. I tried again to try to open the window but this time it was to heavy to budge! So I just took a crow bar and smashed the window into scattered little pieces. (Derek, age 10, P.S. 163, New York, N.Y.)

Derek's narrative illustrates the effects of mime on attention to descriptive detail. Note, for instance, some of his phrases, such as "a strange window, white and chipped," and "scattered little pieces," wording unusual for a child his age. Also witness his mentioning in one short paragraph a multitude of sensory elements, including visual (the sun, the window, and the crowbar), auditory (birds singing, the window shattering), and tactile/kinesthetic (the

strong breeze, his fingers smashed under the window). The mime exercise of conjuring up images out of nothing could very well have triggered the formulation of these elements. He then transcribed these images into a quality written narrative.

Our next story illustrates mime's ability to cultivate a sense of audience in writers. The author, a third-grader, had this to write about her scene, in which she was directed to "Bake a cake":

> First I took a egg and it went in the bowl. I put flour in it. And put sugar salt, pepper, eggs, flour. I put it in the oven. But then I forgot something. I put ice cream and cream. I put so much stuff. And then telephone rang. I picked it up. And the cake was getting fatter and fatter. And EXPLODE! And I said could you hold for a second. I went one step in the kitchen and capluk. I fell. My face was all covered with flour. And I sneezed alot. I said on the phone I have to ahhhchoo! go ahhhchoo! Bye ahhhchoo! I had to take a bath. Then I ate my dinner. (Sadia, age 9, P.S. 19, New York, N.Y.)

Sadia's writing parallels her very funny performance, one which was a favorite for her classmates to watch. Specifically, her reaction to the explosion and then falling into the flour and having a sneezing fit evoked much laughter. I submit that Sadia learned from her audience's reactions which elements in her story were effective. On her feet, she modified her performance by making the most of the segments that generated the greatest laughter and shortening the rest. As a result of this acquired skill, her written work profited: it is a charming, funny piece. Teachers often complain that their students' writing contains no awareness of audience or purpose. Doing mime solves this problem, as students create a story for a very real audience, one that gives immediate feedback and recognition. Besides having an awareness of her audience, however, Sadia had a strong purpose as well: to make her classmates laugh. Thus, when her story

was transcribed onto paper, it maintained its energy and sense of interaction. Finally, when Sadia shared her written piece among members of her class, the importance of writing for an audience was further reinforced.

Our last sample was written by a third-grader after acting out his story, "Take care of a baby":

> One day my mother went for shopping. She told me to take care of the baby. After she left, the baby started crying I thought it was hungry. So I took the baby and fed it. Then the baby started to pull my hair. I put the baby in the crib. It started crying again. I really did not know what to do now. Now I was angry. I got so angry that I almost bumped my head in the crib. I took the baby for a bath and then the baby started to cry for its rubber ducky. I gave him his rubber ducky. The baby was quite and started playing. Then I slipped on the water and splashed my face in the tub full of water. At last my mother was home and I don't have to take care of the baby anymore today. (Amardeep, age 9, P.S. 19, New York, N.Y.)

Like the previous author's work, Amardeep's narrative is comically well-developed, consisting of a central conflict and a series of interesting cause-and-effect activities intended to alleviate the conflict. What distinguishes his composition from those of other children, however, is his inclusion of and reference to various emotional states. Young children, even when writing narratives about an emotionally laden event, almost never mention the internal feelings or thoughts of any of the characters, resulting in a flat piece of writing. In contrast, Amardeep explicitly states not only his own feelings ("so angry"), but also the feelings of the baby ("hungry"). And he implies even more feelings, including sadness (the baby crying), confusion ("I really did not know what to do now"), and relief (when his mother came home). What aided him in including emotion in his writing, I believe, was his experiencing these feelings in his pantomimed story just prior to writing. Acting out emotions as part of a

narrative allows the child to recognize them as central to the piece. He sees that the emotions themselves, besides being a response to the events in the story, often serve to trigger further developments. In addition, he learns that emotional expresion is engaging to the audience; indeed, viewers often respond the most fully to these outbursts. Thus, the emphasis in mime on emotional expression translates directly into writing; what ensues is a story that reveals the colorful world of internal events.

Supplemental Mime Activities

While there are limitless variations to Writing through Mime, many of them worth experimenting with, I now describe two activities that are particularly valuable in enhancing the program.

The first activity, excellent for both beginners and experts, is an exercise to heighten emotional expression. The teacher, rather than assigning action phrases as topics, assigns single emotive words, such as "sad", "excited", "afraid", "angry", or "embarrassed". Students act out each emotion in two steps: first, they use only their faces, keeping their arms, legs, and torsos stiff; then, after a minute, they make appropriate movements with their bodies as well. While the students emote, the teacher encourages them to exaggerate their expressions, since they must carry across the room. As with other mime exercises, the audience members attempt to guess the emotions, which over the course of several turns should encompass a wide variety. During this exercise

the students do no writing. Later, however, as a result of this activity, their emotions will be more evident in both their acting and writing.

The second activity, which students should attempt once they have mastered solo acting, is to do scenes in pairs or small groups. Because group acting brings into play the complexities of relationships, this practice often results in stories that are more interesting and more fully developed. The procedure is the same as that outlined for solo acting, with a few modifications. To begin with, students form pairs or small groups. The teacher assigns them topics that should include two or more roles, e.g., "Walk a dog" or "Rescue someone in a burning building". These roles may be of everyday people (themselves, a parent and child, teammates, etc.) or of fantasy figures (Batman and Robin, a King and Queen, etc.). After receiving their topics, students discuss, with their partners only, what role each will play and what activities they will engage in. While they enact their stories, the teacher comments on the level of interaction among partners. When it is time to write, they should do so separately, though they may consult with their partners if need be.

Writing through Mime, the teaching method described in this paper, is intended to augment the elementary school teacher's inventory of tools to facilitate better and freer writing among her pupils. I trust that the teacher will adapt the method to his or her needs, committed simply to tapping the natural affinity between mime and writing.

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